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Legal aid groups say they'll merge to save money

By Mike Glover

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DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - The state's two largest groups offering legal services to the poor announced plans Tuesday to merge in hopes of streamlining operations.

The merger will combine the Legal Services Corporation of Iowa with the Legal Aid Society of Polk County to form Iowa Legal Aid.

The group is projected to handle 20,000 cases this year involving 50,000 people. It will provide legal services to the poor in non-criminal cases.

"Legal aid provides a critical service to people who are truly in need - women and children, veterans, the elderly and low-income individuals," said Kevin Collins, president-elect of the Iowa State Bar Association.

The merger was necessary because of budget pressures, said Dennis Groenenboom, head of the new group, which is facing a projected \$1 million budget shortfall this year.

Federal funding has been cut by 20 percent, while state funding has been cut nearly in half over the last five years. That's forced the group to leave positions for lawyers vacant.

Supporters said it's crucial to assure that everyone has access to legal advice, which they say won't be the case without assistance.

"You can't have justice for half the people and not the rest," said former Gov. Robert Ray, who began his career as a legal aid lawyer.

"I have a real understanding of how important it is for low-income people to have access to lawyers," said Attorney General Tom Miller, whose first job was as a legal aid lawyer in Baltimore.